

Reflections on urban space: streets through time*

by Simon T. Loseby

1. Introduction

A street through time, a popular historical picture-book for children, does exactly what its title suggests, taking its young readers on an exciting journey from the Stone Age down to the present by the simple but effective medium of representing the evolution over time of an individual British street in a riverside settlement, elaborated in vivid and enticing detail in a succession of double-page spreads¹. “Roman times”, located in AD 100, are epitomised, as one might expect (even in Britain), by stone houses and shops, brightly-tiled roofs, toilet facilities, imported goods, and, looming over this vibrant scene, a representative selection of substantial public buildings – baths, amphitheatre, temple, and a basilica nearing completion; only a few native huts and the troop of soldiers emerging from the Roman fort on the hill in the background might hint that the achievement of this newly-urbanised prosperity was anything but consensual. For this, we are told, was the moment when the village of earlier periods had become a town. But the impressionable audience has already been warned not to expect progress from here on to be entirely smooth or linear. In the next *vignette*, set in AD 600, and entitled “the invaders”, the stone houses have been replaced by huts of wood and thatch (even the “chief’s house”), the public buildings are all in

* These reflections are inspired by the contributions assembled in *Le trasformazioni dello spazio urbano nell’alto medioevo (secoli V-VIII). Città mediterranee a confronto*, edited by Carmen Eguiluz Méndez and Stefano Gasparri, which forms the monographic section of «Reti Medievali - Rivista», 11 (2010), 2 <www.rivista.retimedievali.it>.

¹ A. Millard and S. Noon, *A street through time*, London 1998.

ruins, the Roman river-bridge has vanished, and wolves can be seen to lurk menacingly just outside the stockade of a settlement whose visible inhabitants seem dedicated to subsistence rather than exchange. «All the Roman comforts, such as baths and piped water», have been forgotten; so too have the toilets, as a caption pandering to the occasionally scatological interests of the intended readership specifically points out. A succinct general explanation of what lay behind this scene of dereliction has previously been provided by the concise introductory overview of the street's history: «everything changed again when Rome's empire was invaded by barbarians. The town was destroyed, our street became part of a small village, and people's standard of living plummeted. The struggle to survive and prosper began anew».

This bleak perspective may be designed to be more applicable to the abandoned street-scapes of the cities of Roman Britain at around the time of the arrival of the mission of Pope Gregory to the Anglo-Saxons than it would be to contemporary urban landscapes in other regions of the former western Roman empire, but later volumes in the same series are, if only by omission, dismissive of the prospects of post-Roman urbanism more generally². The similarly-styled depictions provided in *A city through time*, for example – the anonymous subject of which is tantalisingly located at the mouth of a river somewhere on the Mediterranean coast – skip directly from “Citizens of Rome (AD 120)” to “the medieval city (1250)”, leaving the intervening urban millennium strictly to the imagination, whereas the volume in the series devoted more specifically to ports leaves a shorter but more ominous-sounding gap between “Under Roman rule, c.150 CE”, and “A new start, c. 950 CE”³. Whether in this hint at an intervening hiatus or collapse in urbanism and exchange, or in the more explicit imagery of *A street through time*, the idea of an early medieval catastrophe is, of course, all but immovably lodged in the British popular consciousness, as epitomised in the notion of the “Dark Ages”, a term of such distinctive resonance that it was dragged into the early stages of the debate about early medieval Italian urbanism, if only in order to call its utility firmly into question⁴.

The general historiographical trend of late, whether in reference to cities or to society at large, has similarly tended in the opposite direction, rehabilitating the late and post-Roman centuries as a time of considerable cultural continuities, whether within the elastic framework of Late Antiquity, or

² Britain: S.T. Loseby, *Power and towns in late Roman Britain and early Anglo-Saxon England*, in *Sedes regiae (ann. 400-800)*, eds. G. Ripoll and J.-M. Gurt, Barcelona 2000, pp. 319-370. For a much more optimistic viewpoint, K. Dark, *Civitas to kingdom: British political continuity, 300-800*, Leicester 1994.

³ P. Steele and S. Noon, *A city through time*, London 2004; A. Millard and S. Noon, *A port through time*, London 2006.

⁴ Its applicability was promptly questioned by C. La Rocca, “Dark Ages” a Verona. *Edilizia privata, aree aperte e strutture pubbliche in una città dell'Italia settentrionale*, in «Archeologia medievale», 13 (1986), pp. 31-78.

under the aegis of the Transformation of the Roman World project and its various offshoots⁵. Nevertheless, as Stefano Gasparri notes in his introduction to this collection of papers, this pervasive image of a comparatively smooth transition has recently been called vigorously into question by Bryan Ward-Perkins, whose *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilisation* lays particular emphasis upon the material conditions of daily existence, and stresses the “disappearance of comfort” that the decline of social and economic complexity inflicted upon the inhabitants of the post-Roman west⁶. Indeed, the twin emphases of this work, in its first part upon the decisive role of the barbarian invasions in bringing about these changes, and, in its second, upon the widespread and multifaceted deterioration in living standards that ensued, might be said to mesh with the summary perspective on the post-Roman period offered by the authors of *A street through time*. However, the particular fate of cities is not directly addressed at any point within Ward-Perkins’ provocative analysis⁷. This omission is perhaps surprising in light of the economic and material dimensions of urbanism and its familiar associations, past and present, with conceptions of civilisation, but all the more so given the author’s many distinguished contributions to the study of late antique and early medieval cities, especially those in Italy⁸. In these works, and in marked contrast to the tenor of his *Fall of Rome*, Ward-Perkins has tended to take a relatively positive view of post-Roman urbanism, as explicitly indicated in his sharp and lucid survey of the nuances of the lively debate that developed among Italian and British scholars from the mid-1980s over the post-Roman fate of the city in northern Italy, where he situated himself slightly over towards the “optimism/continuity” side of a spectrum designed to represent various scholarly positions schematically in graphical form⁹.

⁵ A. Cameron, *The “long” late antiquity: a late twentieth-century model*, in *Classics in progress: essays on ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. T.P. Wiseman, Oxford 2006, pp. 165-191; A. Giardina, *Esplosione di tardoantico*, in «Studi storici», 40 (1999), pp. 157-180; I.N. Wood, *The European Science Foundation’s programme on the transformation of the Roman world and the emergence of early medieval Europe*, in «Early medieval Europe», 6 (1997), pp. 217-227.

⁶ B. Ward-Perkins, *The fall of Rome and the end of civilisation*, Oxford 2005; “The disappearance of comfort” is the title of ch. 5.

⁷ The only brief observations on urbanism in Ward-Perkins, *The fall of Rome* cit., occur at p. 3 (the splendour of Roman cities); pp. 109-110 (the deteriorating quality of urban and rural building), pp. 124-126 (urban collapse around the Aegean c. 600, but continuing prosperity in the Levant), pp. 148-150 (the shrinking scale of churches); it is absent from the brief discussion of “civilisation” at pp. 167-168, though “large cities” do appear among the criteria that might be used to define it at pp. 178-179.

⁸ See, *inter alia*, B. Ward-Perkins, *From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Urban public building in northern and central Italy, AD 300-850*, Oxford 1984; Ward-Perkins, *The cities*, in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 13, *The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*, eds. A. Cameron and P. Garnsey, Cambridge 1998, pp. 371-410.

⁹ B. Ward-Perkins, *Continuitists, catastrophists, and the towns of post-Roman northern Italy*, in «Papers of the British School at Rome», 65 (1997), pp. 157-176, esp. fig. 4, p. 161, where the author depicts himself as outflanked in optimism by Wickham and La Rocca, but a great deal

When considering the papers assembled here, therefore, we might therefore bear this seeming contradiction in mind in addressing not merely how they contribute to the ongoing study of urbanism, but also what they might imply for the renewed debate about the more general causes and consequences of the “fall of Rome”.

2. *Urban historiography*

Ward-Perkins’ historiographical summary wittily set out, for the benefit of Anglophone audiences in particular, how and why the Italian debate over the fate of the ancient city was unusually precocious and temporarily heated, for a variety of reasons mentioned by several of the authors of the papers in this collection of papers, and crisply summarised by Chris Wickham: the priority and resonance of the city in Italian history and historiography more generally, the particularly swift and productive development of Italian urban archaeology from the early 1980s onwards, and the creative tension that this threw up between the familiar textual evidence for urban continuity and the new material indications of decay and abandonment¹⁰. If the Italian debate has since lost something of its distinctive and polemical qualities, this does not stem from any decline in the complexity or intellectual appeal of the problems involved, but rather reflects the maturing of urbanism as a central theme in the study of the late antique and early medieval period, and the extent to which scholars working upon cities in other regions of the late and post-Roman world have since been striving to catch up. This pursuit has perhaps proved more successful in the material sphere, where a widespread expansion in urban archaeological data available from other regions has coincided with a slowdown in major new discoveries in Italy, as is variously lamented here, than in the textual, if only because the richness of the Italian textual record for some crucial aspects of early medieval urbanism, such as the presence in cities of a resident aristocracy, is rarely matched in other regions. In historiographical terms, too, the study of late antique and early medieval cities in Italy still seems to me more consistently and thoroughly integrated than it is, for example, in France, where lingering chronological and thematic divides continue to separate the study of the ancient from that of the medieval city, and of urban centres in the north from those in the south, as well as to distinguish those working in the long-established traditions of “Christian archaeology” from those approaching the problem of early medieval urbanism in more holistic fashion. In general, nevertheless, the “urban debate” has expanded from its Italian roots to shift the changes tak-

more positive in his view of urbanism than Brogiolo, Hodges and Whitehouse, and, above all, Carandini.

¹⁰ C. Wickham, *Framing the early middle ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800*, Oxford 2005, pp. 644-645.

ing place in cities, whether in their institutional dynamics, ideological significance, or material form, to the heart of contemporary interpretations of the nature and significance of the transition from the ancient to the medieval world¹¹.

This collection of papers on urban space therefore takes its place within a burgeoning historiography of late antique and early medieval urbanism, and incorporates various of its familiar methodological strands: the individual or comparative case-study, the exploration of particular urban monuments, landscapes, networks, or ideologies, the critical syntheses of current themes, or the setting out of prospective research agendas. But although their frames of reference are very different, these studies seem to me cumulatively to reflect two very general characteristics of the current “state of play” in the field, which are at times explicitly highlighted by their individual authors, in particular by Enrico Zanini. Firstly, although the exploration of specific topics may often dictate an emphasis on either textual or archaeological data, it has become widely acknowledged that the general theme of late antique and early medieval urbanism needs to be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective that considers both the literary representation of cities and their material reality. The necessary qualification, however, is that each category of data is best interpreted as far as possible on its own terms. This reduces the seductive temptation of slotting evidence derived from one discipline into a framework prefabricated on the basis of the other, thereby creating a superficially coherent but inherently artificial synthesis; Sauro Gelichi forcefully reminds us of the perils of this approach in reference to the interpretation of recent archaeological discoveries in Venice within frameworks drawn from a heady mixture of dubious historical traditions and teleological myths of exceptionalism. More constructively, it encourages not only the appreciation of the connections to be found within the available textual and archaeological data, but, just as importantly, the confronting of the contradictions or dislocations that frequently exist between them. At Mérida, for example, the author of the *Vitas Patrum Emeretensium* vividly evokes a thriving late sixth-century urban community, as brought to life for us here by Pablo Díaz. On the face of it, contemporary Tours seems from the writings of its bishop, Gregory, to have been remarkably similar: here too we see the major suburban martyr-cult focus, the urban crowd, the festivals, the processions, the pilgrims, and, above all, the bishop himself, acknowledged leader of his community and impresario for the protective powers of the local martyr¹². But whereas the archaeological record from Mérida to some extent substantiates

¹¹ P. Majocchi, *Le città europee nell'alto medioevo tra storia e archeologia (secoli V-X)*, in «Reti Medievali - Rivista», 11 (2010), 1, <www.rivista.retimedievali.it>; L. Lavan, *Late antique urbanism: a bibliographic essay*, in *Recent research in late antique urbanism*, ed. L. Lavan, Portsmouth 2001, pp. 9-26.

¹² L. Pietri, *La ville de Tours du IV^e au VI^e siècle: naissance d'une cité chrétienne*, Roma-Paris 1983.

the impression of dynamism, that of Tours, in flagrant contrast to the textual evidence, is suggestive of a meagre and impoverished community¹³.

One way of addressing such contradictions has been to hold one data-set up against the other and decide which is the more meaningful; the effect of this was often, in light of the new archaeological evidence, to question the claims of some early medieval cities to be considered truly urban, as in the initial stages of the Italian urban debate, and as Henri Galinié has argued in the case of Tours: «Tours apparaît au VI^e siècle, comme une ville sans vie urbaine»¹⁴. In general, however, such positions have been superseded in the historiography of early medieval cities around the Mediterranean, in part simply because of the recovery of more and better archaeological evidence of activity within urban centres, but more generally by the recognition that the discrepancies in the textual and archaeological evidence have the potential to shed considerable light on different facets of the contemporary experience and, no less revealingly, perception of urbanism. The second aspect of this collection of papers that reflects the present state of urban scholarship is therefore that it consistently seeks to hold the idea of the city in balance with the reality, whether as a means of understanding the changes taking place, or, equally, the ways in which those changes were understood – and given order and meaning – by contemporaries¹⁵.

This increased emphasis on the perception of urbanism has meant that the time-honoured problem of how a city should be defined, greatly complicated by national variations in inherited assumptions about urbanism and in the nuances of the terms by which it is described in different languages, has tended for the time being to retreat into the background, taking with it the check-lists of characteristics that might qualify or disqualify a given settlement's pretensions to urban status, with their mechanical and frequently culturally-specific connotations. But the more significant consequence of this general acceptance that the changes taking place in late antique and early medieval cities can and should be considered within their own, contemporary contexts has been a growing reluctance to evaluate them within the potentially teleological frameworks of their perpetuation of Roman ideological and monumental urban norms or (rather less frequently) their anticipation of their medieval equivalents. This recognition means, in turn, that the abstract nouns – “decline”, “continuity”, even, dare I say it, “transition” – that had previously tended to characterise accounts of late antique and early medieval urban change are com-

¹³ P. Mateos Cruz, Augusta Emerita, *de capital de la Diócesis Hispaniarum a sede temporal visigoda*, in *Sedes regiae* cit., pp. 491-520; H. Galinié, *Tours de Grégoire, Tours des archives du sol*, in *Grégoire de Tours et l'espace gaulois*, eds. N. Gauthier and H. Galinié, Tours 1997, pp. 65-80, and more generally, *Tours antique et médiéval. Lieux de vie, temps de la ville*, ed. H. Galinié, Tours 2007.

¹⁴ Galinié, *Tours de Grégoire* cit., pp. 74 sgg.

¹⁵ See e.g. *The idea and ideal of the town between late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages*, eds. G.P. Brogiolo and B. Ward-Perkins, Leiden 1999.

ing increasingly to be avoided, or else to be applied to particular phenomena in precisely-defined contexts rather than in generic or universal terms¹⁶.

3. *The long legacy of late antique urbanism*

The study of late antique and early medieval urbanism on its own terms may be a desirable goal, but it is, of course, easier said than done, not so much because it lacks a distinctive character than because it evolves against the backdrop of an established institutional and material framework, over a period of several centuries. One key to lending this phase an identity of its own lies in the acknowledgment of just how lengthy it was, in many regions of the Mediterranean proving far more protracted than the formative, “classical” period of Roman urbanism that it superseded, which was past its heyday in much of the west by the later second century. It is futile to complain about the arbitrariness of periodization and the rigidity with which past perceptions are perpetuated by disciplinary convention, but in reference to urbanism it is worth emphasising the ways in which the familiar distinction between ancient and medieval, epitomised in “the fall of Rome”, obscures how several parallel trends emerged between the later second and later fourth centuries that would arguably prove to be of more decisive importance than even the political transformations of the fifth in defining the parameters of subsequent developments in Mediterranean urbanism.

Three of the most important of these trends are too familiar to need more than brief and schematic summary¹⁷. First, the centralisation of the late Roman state and the expansion of its administrative apparatus undermined existing traditions of curial government, consolidating the perception among local elites that that the burdens incumbent upon civic office-holding were coming to outweigh the social and political capital to be gained from it, and accentuating their reluctance to continue spending their money on traditional amenities and entertainments for their fellow-citizens. Secondly, growing frontier insecurity lent a new impetus to urban fortification, adding a practical edge to the established symbolic resonance of city-walls, as existing cir-

¹⁶ Among considerations of the problems of these abstractions, see J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz *et al.*, *The uses and abuses of the concept of ‘decline’ in later Roman history, or was Gibbon politically incorrect?*, in *Recent research in late antique urbanism* cit., pp. 233-245; J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Transformation and decline: are the two really incompatible?*, in *Die Stadt in der Spätantike - Niedergang oder Wandel?*, eds. J.-U. Krause and C. Witschel, Stuttgart 2006, pp. 463-483; B. Ward-Perkins, *Urban continuity?*, in *Towns in transition: urban evolution in late antiquity and the early middle ages*, eds. N. Christie and S.T. Loseby, Aldershot 1996, pp. 4-17; A. Giardina, *The transition to late antiquity*, in *The Cambridge economic history of the Greco-Roman world*, eds. W. Scheidel, I. Morris and R. Saller, Cambridge 2007, pp. 743-768, rightly criticising the loose application of “transition” at pp. 753-755.

¹⁷ They are sketched out at greater length in S.T. Loseby, *Mediterranean cities*, in *A companion to late Antiquity*, ed. P. Rousseau, Oxford 2009, pp. 139-55.

cuits were restored or modified, and new ones erected. Finally, the conversion of the empire to Christianity and the replication of the institutional framework of the state in that of the church created both a new urban potentate in the person of the bishop and a new motive for monumental patronage, and instigated a new and dynamic framework for the expression of civic identity through liturgical practice.

These changes varied from region to region in the scale and nature of their impact, and their consequences were only very gradually and unevenly realised. In combination, even so, they set in train the development of a distinctly late antique expression of urbanism that, crucially, was in place prior to the disintegration of the western empire in the fifth century, and did much to shape the outcomes discussed in this collection of papers. Politically, the leadership of urban communities gravitated away from the anachronistic city-councils to be organically reassembled around informal coterie of notables. These self-selecting bodies were ill-suited to formal definition by their very nature, as is confirmed by the enduringly generic terminology with which our sources refer to their members, but typically they feature local men of standing in the centralised hierarchies that mattered – the bishop, senators, and central government officials – alongside other leading local landowners¹⁸. Materially, the dwindling epigraphic record combines with imperial legislation to suggest that from the fourth century onwards spending on the provision of traditional urban monuments and amenities (or, more frequently, the less prestigious but relentlessly expensive task of maintaining the existing ones), devolved increasingly upon governors acting in their official capacity. The centralisation of power and monumental patronage thus tended to intensify existing distinctions between cities, as it did between persons, on the basis of their standing within the imperial hierarchy¹⁹.

For the select but proliferating number of centres that were graced by the presence of the emperor and his court this could generate spectacular growth and lavish programmes of embellishment, nowhere more so than in Constantinople, of course, but in favoured western centres too, such as Trier, Milan, Córdoba, and, latterly, Ravenna, the exponential development of which, outlined here by Carmen Eguluz Méndez, illustrates the impact of imperial patronage²⁰. It is at this exalted level, where cost was not at issue,

¹⁸ For differing views of the timing and significance of this change, cf. J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *The decline and fall of the Roman city*, Oxford 2001, pp. 104-136, with G.A. Cecconi, *Crisi e trasformazioni del governo municipale in Occidente fra IV e VI secolo*, in *Die Stadt in der Spätantike* cit., pp. 285-318, and G. Laniado, *Recherches sur les notables municipaux dans l'empire protobyzantin*, Paris 2002, to both of whom Liebeschuetz, *Transformation and decline* cit., pp. 470-472 briefly responds.

¹⁹ For the operation of this hierarchy in Italian cities, see Ward-Perkins, *From classical antiquity to the middle ages* cit., ch. 2; F. Marazzi, *Cadavera urbium, nuove capitali e Roma aeterna: l'identità urbana in Italia fra crisi, rinascita e propaganda*, in *Die Stadt in der Spätantike* cit., pp. 33-65.

²⁰ Cf. most recently D.M. Deliyannis, *Ravenna in late antiquity*, Cambridge 2010, esp. ch. 3.

that we can see the clearest indications of the emphases of the new urbanism, as imperial residences were tricked out with massive and imposing wall-circuits, substantial and lavishly-decorated churches, and, more exclusively, palace complexes laid out in close association with circuses, which combined with monumental street-axes and spaces to provide appropriate settings for the manifestation of the emperor's power and majesty²¹. The emphases of the new order were likewise reflected in a measure of investment on specific priorities, such as the fortification of lesser centres of perceived strategic or military significance to imperial authority, and replicated, on a suitably reduced scale, in the diocesan and provincial capitals, where resident governors were understandably inclined to concentrate their efforts, and were not shy of despoiling lesser cities in order to do so²². (Although in Gaul the archaeology of late antique Tours or Aix-en-Provence warns against assuming that the patronage of urban monuments and amenities necessarily trickled down even to this level to any consistent extent²³). The majority of cities, however, were left with nothing but the traditions of civic munificence to call upon. In much of the western empire, in particular, these were much weaker than before, as the wealthy preferred instead to expend their resources on the erection or embellishment of lavish private residences²⁴. The emphasis of such private investment in public projects as continued was, moreover, beginning to be diverted in new, Christian directions, orchestrated by the emerging civic leadership of the bishops.

In around 400, therefore, at the start of the period with which the papers in this collection are concerned, urban space was already in a state of flux. Cities were the quintessential demonstration of what it meant to be Roman, and when that meaning changed, urban landscapes changed with it. In the militarised, christianised, centralised world of late Antiquity that meant walls, churches, and, where imperial authority was routinely represented, palaces were the decisive elements that would become central to the conception of urbanism. The corollary of this shift was a decline in the importance

²¹ For the much-discussed association of palace, circus and imperial power, see the paper of Giorgio Vespignani, and C. Heucke, *Circus und Hippodrom als politischer Raum. Untersuchungen zum grossen Hippodrom von Konstantinopel und zu entsprechenden Anlagen in spätantiken Kaiserresidenzen*, Hildesheim 1994.

²² Fortification: e.g. in Spain, C. Fernández-Ochoa and A. Morillo, *Walls in the urban landscape of late Roman Spain: defence and imperial strategy*, in *Hispania in late Antiquity: current perspectives*, eds. K. Bowes and M. Kulikowski, Leiden-Boston 2005, pp. 299-340. Governors: *Cod. Theod.* XV.1.14, of 365, with other legislation in the same section of the Code.

²³ *Tours antique et médiévale* cit., pp. 355-361; *Atlas topographique des villes de Gaule méridionale*, 1, Aix-en-Provence, ed. J. Guyon et al., Montpellier 1998.

²⁴ I. Baldini Lippolis, *La domus tardantica. Forme e rappresentazioni dello spazio domestico nelle città del Mediterraneo*, Bologna-Imola 2001; J. Arce, A. Chavarría and G. Ripoll, *The urban domus in late antique Hispania: examples from Emerita, Barcino and Complutum*, in *Housing in late antiquity: from palaces to shops*, eds. L. Lavan, L. Özgenel and A. Sarantis, Leiden-Boston 2007, pp. 305-336.

of other categories of public building, but also, more surprisingly, a wider-ranging disavowal of the value-system that had created and sustained the coherently-planned and carefully-regulated cityscapes of earlier periods, the symptoms of which are reflected in a whole series of phenomena that imperial authorities were already seeking to regulate from the fourth century onwards: the dereliction of public monuments and amenities, a breakdown in the separation between public and private space, the proliferation of smaller, simpler units of occupation, often established within existing town-houses or monuments, the increased use of recycled or inferior building materials, and the intrusion of industrial or funerary activity into public or residential spaces. The significances of these various transformations, and the interplay of financial, cultural, and political considerations in bringing them about need not be explored in detail here, but suffice to note their outcomes coincided with and intensified the reconfiguration of urban space around the new social priorities. In this less sympathetic climate for urbanism, a minority of cities disappeared altogether; the scale of this rationalisation – significant in Italy, but minimal in Gaul – varied according to the density of existing urban networks. But the majority survived, only to be variously scarred by the weakening of the urban aesthetic of earlier centuries, as their built environments underwent these simultaneous processes of renewal and – rather more extensively – decay²⁵. In Rome, the mid-fifth century contrast highlighted by Andrea Augenti between the sorry state of the Crypta Balbi and, just around the corner, the imposing volume and resplendent gleam of S. Maria Maggiore, is particularly dizzying and immediate, but it would have been reproduced in some fashion in every fifth and sixth century city, just as it is in many modern urban environments; it is such confusing but compelling juxtapositions that lie at the heart of late antique urbanism²⁶.

The consequences of these developments for urban space resist easy synthesis, because they varied in the timing and the nature of their interaction not merely between regions, but from one city to the next, and were susceptible to a number of intrinsically local variables, not the least significant of which was the existing built environment, as effectively inescapable as it was increasingly expendable. But two general points deserve particular emphasis. Firstly, the political, cultural, and topographical transformations that these changes entailed were not in themselves inimical to urbanism, as is abundantly demonstrated by parallel developments in the cities of the heartlands of the eastern empire. Here, as Enrico Zanini stresses, the reconfiguration of

²⁵ G.P. Brogiolo, *Ideas of the town in Italy during the transition from antiquity to the middle ages*, in *The idea and ideal of the town* cit., pp. 101-105; M. Kulikowski, *Cities and government in late antique Hispania*, in *Hispania in late antiquity* cit., pp. 49-64; S.T. Loseby, *Decline and change in the cities of late antique Gaul*, in *Die Stadt in der Spätantike* cit., pp. 71-83.

²⁶ For widespread decay in a contemporary urban landscape, in this case as a result of a shift in population to the suburbs, see the powerful photo-study of Y. Marchand and C. Meffre, *The ruins of Detroit*, London 2010.

urban political culture and topography took place within the context of a period of sustained economic prosperity before enjoying something of a heyday under Justinian, who characteristically showed his dedication to the urban ideal in theory and practice by combining the legal rationalisation of recent trends with a renewed devotion to monumental embellishment and renewal²⁷. The continuous evolution of eastern cities during late Antiquity serves, secondly, to reinforce how none of the developments taking place – unless, in general terms, the imperative towards fortification – came about in direct consequence of barbarian invasion. It is certainly the case, even so, that they were accentuated or modified by the political crisis and fragmentation of the fifth century west, almost as soon as some of them had got properly under way. The Christianisation of urban landscapes, in particular, gathered momentum only with the decisive cultural shifts in the decades either side of 400 brilliantly depicted by the late Robert Markus, to the extent that the process appears scarcely to have reached the cities of Roman Britain, for example, before their systemic collapse derailed it altogether²⁸. Around the western Mediterranean, however, while the immediate impact of the transition from imperial to barbarian rule upon cities could be locally or temporarily considerable – and in a few cases genuinely devastating – for the most part it did remarkably little to deflect the development of urban landscapes or civic government from the trajectories upon which they were already set. Instead, the effect of the change was primarily to ensure that, in contrast with the east, these developments were played out within a context of growing economic and infrastructural simplification.

4. *Urban space*

The most consistent and enduring legacy of the new urban priorities of late antiquity was the dominance of early medieval cities by their walls and churches. The former were regularly maintained, both as symbols of urban status, and to be called routinely into service in periods of military conflict, while the latter continued to be erected to the extent that in those cities from which sufficient anecdotal evidence, or, more rarely, comprehensive lists, survive, dozens of churches – and, latterly, monasteries – can be seen to have accumulated by the end of the period under discussion in these papers. Small in scale though many of these buildings undoubtedly were, they offer the clearest evidence of the enduring appeal of the city as a theatre for competitive aristocratic display and monumental patronage, whether indulged in by

²⁷ D. Claude, *Die byzantinische Stadt im 6. Jahrhundert*, München 1969; M. Whittow, *Ruling the late Roman and early Byzantine city: a continuous history*, in «Past and Present», (1990), 129, pp. 3-29.

²⁸ R. Markus, *The end of ancient Christianity*, Cambridge 1990; S. Esmonde Cleary, *The ending of Roman Britain*, London 1989.

royalty, as in the case of many of the dynastic foundations of Lombard Pavia discussed here by Piero Majocchi, or by rival elite families, as in Merovingian Clermont, where at least twenty-four of the fifty-four churches listed in a tenth-century catalogue were in existence by the middle of the eighth century²⁹. Christian writers, for their part, rationalised the conceptual and topographical structuring of urban landscapes around walls and churches into a coherent vision at once realistic and symbolic: the bishop at the heart of the city, the saints in the suburbs, and the walls in between, all working together for the safeguarding of their communities from harm³⁰.

This idealised image of coherence is nevertheless doubly deceptive. First, the processes of fortification and Christianisation were in themselves very different in nature, and paradoxical in their long-term effects. Whether newly-erected in late Antiquity, or bequeathed from earlier centuries, city-walls were unitary structures, built to suit the military or symbolic logic of the moment; they tended thereafter to be lightly modified or repeatedly repaired rather than fundamentally reconceived, unless exceptional resources were available of the type, for example, that had sustained the expansion of fifth-century Ravenna, or their perimeters were substantially reduced, as was regularly the case in late antique Gaul. But early medieval urban communities had little motive, and usually insufficient means, to do anything other than maintain pre-existing circuits. In principle, therefore, the effects of their defences upon urban space were conservative and centripetal. The Christian landscape that every city was now steadily acquiring was, by contrast, an incremental and organic creation, capable of triggering fundamental shifts in topographical emphasis. The impact of church-building could be to reinforce the existing hierarchy of urban space, as in the accustomed location of cathedral complexes within city-walls, but it simultaneously served to break it down, through the erection of churches over the tombs of the saints in suburban cemeteries. The polyfocal Christian topography that resulted was given retrospective logic through processional liturgies, bringing the urban community together in celebration across an expanded civic space, as in the case of the Easter celebrations at Mérida described here by Pablo Díaz, but it had no inherent spatial integrity. Equally, the accumulation of churches and monasteries on the periphery of cities went some way to dissolving existing distinctions between urban and suburban, not simply by drawing city-dwellers outside the walls in regular worship, but by coming to constitute dis-

²⁹ *Libellus de Ecclesiis Claromontanis*, ed. W. Levison, MGH, *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, VII, Hannover-Leipzig 1920, pp. 456-467; P.-F. Fournier, *Clermont-Ferrand au VI^e siècle*, in «Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes», 128 (1970), pp. 273-344; I. Wood, *The ecclesiastical politics of Merovingian Clermont*, in *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society*, ed. P. Wormald et al., Oxford 1983, pp. 34-55.

³⁰ S.T. Loseby, *Gregory's cities: urban functions in sixth-century Gaul*, in *Franks and Alamanni in the Merovingian period: an ethnographic perspective*, ed. I. Wood, Woodbridge 1998, pp. 252-256.

tinct foci for the exercise of power and patronage, sometimes ultimately to the extent of generating secondary concentrations of permanent settlement.

The more pervasive and fundamental source of incoherence in early medieval urban space was provided, meanwhile, by the inexorable disintegration of the monumental and topographical legacy of earlier periods, as the corrosive effects of the various phenomena described above took increasing hold, exacerbated by the growing impoverishment of urban populations, and probably accentuated during the periods of political turmoil peculiar to individual regions. These processes could be selectively resisted or regulated, most notably in Ostrogothic Italy, but they could not be thrown into reverse³¹. As investment in the maintenance of existing buildings and infrastructure became increasingly limited and sporadic, and the new structures established within, against, and around them became simpler in form and shoddier in execution, so in places the integrity of urban space might begin to break down altogether, with whole areas of a city being left to ruin or flattened for cultivation in between enduring poles of political or religious authority³². In Italy, at least, this disintegration of the urban plan was not as complete as in other regions, as is shown by the widespread survival, wholly or in part, of the Roman street-grids that were perpetuated by house frontages and property boundaries even through periods of abandonment, but the transformation of the urban landscape could nevertheless be far-reaching and profound³³.

The character and meaning of these changes have been much discussed from the outset of the Italian urban debate, and recur here primarily in the context of Rome, which, as Cassiodorus noted, and as Enrico Zanini rightly reminds us, is an altogether exceptional case, both in macrocosm, in its physical size, the grandeur of its built environment, and symbolic resonance, and in microcosm, through the layers of memory and meaning that could be carried by any individual monument within it, as Cristina La Rocca's contribution vividly demonstrates³⁴. Even so, the items on the agenda for future research into early medieval Rome advanced by Andrea Augenti – the changing character of residential building, the distribution and organisation of urban productive activity, the eventual imposition of order upon urban burial, the time-honoured problem of the relationship between cities and their hinterlands, the archaeology of social differentiation within the population,

³¹ C. La Rocca, *Una prudente maschera 'antiqua'. La politica edilizia di Teoderico*, in *Teoderico il grande e i Goti d'Italia*, in *Atti del XIII congresso internazionale di studi sull'alto medioevo*, Spoleto 1993, pp. 451-515.

³² G.P. Brogiolo and S. Gelichi, *La città nell'alto medioevo italiano*, Bari 1998, pp. 45-154; G.P. Brogiolo, *Brescia altomedievale. Urbanistica ed edilizia dal IV al IX secolo*, Mantova 1993.

³³ B. Ward-Perkins, *Can the survival of an ancient town-plan be used as evidence of dark-age urban life?*, in *Splendida civitas nostra: studi archeologici in onore di Antonio Frova*, eds. G. Cavalieri Manasse and E. Roffia, Roma 1995, pp. 223-229.

³⁴ Cassiodorus. *Variae* III.29. The dangers of extrapolating from Rome to Italian cities in general are similarly brought out by C. Witschel, *Rom und die Städte Italiens in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter*, in «Bonner Jahrbücher», 159 (2001), 201, pp. 113-162.

the reconstruction of the perception of the city – could all be readily carried over to the study of early medieval urbanism in general, as we look to advance from the identification of the changes taking place in cities to their critical evaluation, and, in particular, for a better understanding of the character and generation of urban renewal from around the eighth century onwards. In these respects, what really distinguishes Rome is perhaps less the nature of the problems than the availability of a range of evidence that allows them to be meaningfully addressed. The same cannot quite yet be said of the origins of another equally exceptional settlement, Venice, although Sauro Gelichi enticingly explains how the potential does now exist for a considered research agenda that situates its archaeology within the wider context of settlement in the lagoon area to extricate them from the vampiric mists of legend³⁵. The problem remains first to explain why Venice came so thoroughly to outstrip its various competitors, and secondly to contextualise its sudden take-off in the decades around 800, while remaining alive to the risks of projecting back and reinforcing the pervasive narrative of Venetian mercantile exceptionalism³⁶. In this regard, one might wonder whether the best comparisons are to be found not in the northern emporia, despite superficial coincidences of chronology, but in western Mediterranean ports of liminal significance in the immediately preceding centuries, such as Marseille.

5. *Urban rulers*

Unlike Venice, the vast majority of cities around the western Mediterranean in 800 were not newly-emerging creations, but the battered survivors of earlier centuries. Their resilience had been guaranteed, above all, by the retention of their roles as the secular and ecclesiastical centres of their territories, the maintenance of urban residences by members of the landholding aristocracy, and the relative concentrations of power and wealth that these institutions and individuals were capable of generating, however reduced in scale these were by comparison with earlier periods. In remaining integral to the organisation of the various successor-states that ringed the western Mediterranean, cities again perpetuated the trends in urban government that were already in place before the disintegration of western empire. Whether or not they were restored to imperial control in the sixth century, their administration had come to be dominated by variations on the same informal combinations of bishop, local magnates, and centrally-appointed officials (now vari-

³⁵ Cf. S. Gelichi, *Flourishing places in north-eastern Italy: towns and emporia between late antiquity and the Carolingian age*, in *Post-Roman towns, trade and settlement in Europe and Byzantium*, 1, *The heirs of the Roman West*, ed. J. Henning, Berlin-New York 2007, pp. 77-104.

³⁶ M. McCormick, *The origins of the European economy, AD 300-900*, Cambridge 2001; M. McCormick, *Where do trading towns come from? Early medieval Venice and the northern emporia*, in *Post-Roman towns* cit., pp. 41-61.

ously dukes and counts) as in the east, operating alongside city-councils that remained influential in some regions, such as Italy, but appear increasingly residual elsewhere³⁷. Indeed, the destruction of the imperially-sponsored hierarchy of ranks and offices – through which, as Sidonius wistfully recalled, it had been possible to tell the high from the low³⁸ – and the inevitable contraction of aristocratic horizons that ensued had helped in some regions to encourage a visible renewal of competition for status in urban politics, which now found its most visible expression in the pursuit of episcopal power. But perhaps the most consistent theme running through these papers is that the ideology of early medieval rulership around the Mediterranean also remained resolutely urban. The focus of the majority of them upon cities that were at some stage imperial or royal capitals is potentially misleading in that, as previously noted, the presence of a ruling authority is probably the single most decisive factor throughout this period in determining not merely the possibilities, but also the particular character of urban monumental patronage. Even so, the same emphasis lends the collection a certain coherence, and makes it in many ways the heir to an earlier volume on *sedes regiae* between 400 and 800, in which several of the same cities feature, and alongside which it can profitably be read³⁹.

The enduring appeal of cities as centres for the representation of power, and the persistent interest of rulers in the upkeep or creation of a monumental setting capable of contributing to the legitimation of that power was undoubtedly inspired in part by a reverence for the past, and again recalls the aforementioned priorities of late antique urbanism. But it becomes clear in this collection how these rulers were not just looking back, but across to the contemporary elaboration of such ideals in the imperial ceremonial of Constantinople, the multi-layered symbolism of which is peeled back for us with meticulous care by Giorgio Vespignani. Whether its subtler intricacies were fully appreciated by the likes of the visiting Frankish ambassadors who so irked the Emperor Maurice by «offering only boastful and juvenile utterances which secure nothing useful», the enthusiastic reception of such models at the emerging western courts is obvious from the outset, whether in the archaeology of fleetingly royal centres such as Visigothic Toulouse, or in the behaviour of the likes of Clovis, as expressed somewhat incoherently in his celebrations at Tours in 507, or in more lasting fashion in his foundation of his own burial-church of the Holy Apostles in Paris⁴⁰. But Clovis was, of

³⁷ Liebeschuetz, *The decline and fall of the Roman city* cit., pp. 124-136.

³⁸ Sid. Apoll., *Ep.* VIII.2.

³⁹ *Sedes regiae* cit.

⁴⁰ *Epistolae Austrasicae* 42; J. Guyon, *Toulouse, la première capitale du royaume wisigoth*, in *Sedes regiae* cit., pp. 219-240; Greg. Tur. *Hist.* II.38, 43. M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory. Triumphal rulership in late Antiquity, Byzantium and the early medieval west*, Cambridge 1986, chs. 7-9, and, more specifically, M. McCormick, *Clovis at Tours, Byzantine public ritual and the origins of medieval ruler symbolism*, in *Das Reich und die Barbaren*, eds. E.K. Chrysos and A. Schwarz, Köln-Wien 1989, pp. 155-180.

course, a mere barbarian in such matters in the eyes of the contemporary Ostrogothic court, as asserted in the very first letter of the *Variae*, cited by several of these papers. Here, addressing Anastasius in the immediate context of recent imperial recognition of his upstart Frankish rival, Theoderic rather cloyingly emphasises not only the thoroughness of his own *imitatio imperii*, but also how the quality of such imitation can serve as a comparative index of the quality of rulership: «regnum nostrum imitatio vestra est, forma boni propositi, unici exemplar imperii: qui quantum vos sequimur, tantum gentes alias anteimus»⁴¹.

No early medieval ruler pursued this goal more consistently than Theoderic, whose devotion to the twin ideals of *Romanitas* and *civilitas*, programmatically set out on his behalf by Cassiodorus, found particular expression in a general concern for urban decorum, material and conceptual, and a specific focus on civic projects and imagery that carried imperial resonances⁴². This strategy, at once ideologically charged and highly pragmatic, did much to ensure his Ostrogothic kingdom the favourable opinion of contemporaries – «even by the Romans he was called a Trajan or a Valentinian, whose times he imitated»⁴³ – and has also guaranteed the king's appeal to posterity, but perhaps makes it all too tempting to fall into the trap of describing his enthusiasm for monumental renewal in a patronising light, as part of a nostalgic but ultimately doomed attempt at being more Roman than the Romans⁴⁴. In fact, as both Cristina La Rocca and Enrico Zanini suggest, Theoderic may have been no less conscious of legitimising his rule by persuading his Italian subjects to catch up with the latest thinking about urbanism in the Constantinopolitan milieu in which he had grown up. As the former makes clear in her contribution, both the distribution and the content of the “building letters” within the *Variae* was carefully designed to make very precise points about the king's commitment to building *civilitas* that could be contrasted with the misdirected efforts of his successors⁴⁵.

No other source enables us to get anywhere near as close to assessing the mindset of an early medieval regime as the *Variae* do, but other rulers in general appear less concerned with the rhetoric of urban restoration than with the reflection of contemporary imperial models of legitimation. A balance between past and present still seems perceptible at the turn of the seventh

⁴¹ Cassiodorus, *Variae* I.1.

⁴² La Rocca, *Una prudente maschera 'antiqua'* cit.; M.J. Johnson, *Toward a history of Theoderic's building program*, in «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 42 (1988), pp. 73-96.

⁴³ Anon. Vales., c. 60: the context, significantly, is Theoderic's giving of games at Rome.

⁴⁴ For an example of this error, S.T. Loseby, *Arles in late antiquity: Gallula Roma Arelas and urbs Genesisii*, in *Towns in transition* cit., p. 55.

⁴⁵ S. Bjornlie, *What have elephants to do with sixth-century politics? A reappraisal of the “official” governmental dossier of Cassiodorus*, in «Journal of Late Antiquity», 2 (2009), pp. 143-171, discusses the same letter, but offers a very different and less persuasive reading of the implications of Cassiodorus' description of the elephant.

century in the thinking of the Lombard Agilulf, who, uniquely among his kingdom's sole rulers, exhibits a preference for the old imperial capital of Milan over Pavia, but was nevertheless inspired by current Byzantine usage when he staged the ceremonial association of his son Adaloald with his rule in the city's circus in 604, in conjunction with the brokering of yet another marriage-alliance with the Franks⁴⁶. But it is the Merovingians themselves who offer probably the clearest indications of the prevailing attractions of that specific component in late antique imperial imagery, as perpetuated and refined in the hippodrome at Constantinople. Procopius' account of the first of these episodes, Theudebert's holding of horse-races at the former capital of Arles on his arrival in Provence in 539, is laconically enigmatic, but there is no reason to doubt the obvious assumption that the venue for these festivities, and perhaps the immediate inspiration for them, was the city's circus⁴⁷. Although a planned series of small residential buildings had been built up against its exterior in around 400, the monument itself was certainly still in use in the early 460s, and no trace of occupation has been found on its surface prior to the abandonment of the adjacent structures and the systematic recovery of the stone footings of the monument itself around the mid-sixth century (though the dating of this destruction phase may not be wholly uninfluenced by Procopius' account)⁴⁸. Whether the sort of show Theudebert was able to put on would have convinced a Constantinopolitan audience of his rulership credentials is probably questionable, but his intentions are obvious, and entirely consistent with the unabashed self-assertion of his dealings with Justinian; indeed, the episode is associated by Procopius with a more transparently imperial and provocative act, the king's minting of gold coins in his own name⁴⁹.

Still grander designs are apparent among the Merovingians in the case of Chilperic, who emerges from his demonising by Gregory of Tours as perhaps the most aspirational and complex of all his family in his projection of rulership, whether in the spiritual context of his literary and theological pretensions, or in a multifaceted pursuit of *imitatio imperii* that Gregory mocks by holding the king in counterpoint with the idealised figure of the Emperor Tiberius⁵⁰. Whereas Theudebert, like rival rulers in other kingdoms, had merely taken

⁴⁶ Paul. Diac., *Hist.Lang.* IV.30.

⁴⁷ Procopius, *Wars* III.33.5.

⁴⁸ Sid. Apoll., *Ep.* I.11.10; a subsequent reference to people attending the theatre and circus in Caesarius of Arles, *Serm.* 61.3 is perhaps generic. For the latest phases of the archaeology, C. Sintès, *La réutilisation des espaces publics à Arles: un témoignage de la fin de l'Antiquité*, in «Antiquité tardive», 2 (1994), pp. 181-192, and more generally M. Heijmans, *Arelatensis urbs. La ville d'Arles à l'époque mérovingienne*, in *La Méditerranée et le monde mérovingien: témoins archéologiques*, ed. X. Delestre et al., Aix-en-Provence 2005, pp. 113-128.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Ep. Aust.* 20 and 18, with R. Collins, *Theodebert I, 'Rex Magnus Francorum'*, in *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society*, ed. P. Wormald et al., Oxford 1983, pp. 7-33.

⁵⁰ Greg. Tur. *Hist.* V.22, V.44, VI.46. The vainglorious aims of Chilperic's *imitatio imperii* are shown by Gregory to be misdirected in *Hist.* VI.2; the comparison with Tiberius is rendered

advantage of an existing circus for purposes of display, Chilperic apparently planned to go one better, and build such monuments anew: «he undertook the building of circuses at Soissons and Paris, offering them to the people for spectacles»⁵¹. No such structures are known to have existed, and it has been suggested that this anecdote implies the re-use of other derelict entertainment buildings in these cities rather than the undertaking of new monumental projects. But even regardless of whether any such entertainments actually took place – Gregory’s phrasing is not altogether explicit on the matter – this interpretation seems both to miss the specific contemporary ceremonial resonance of the circus, and perhaps to underestimate the ambition of a king who is also known to have dabbled in theology and Christian poetry, and who sought to add new letters to the alphabet in the manner of a Roman emperor⁵². For his part, Gregory was clearly familiar with contemporary Constantinopolitan practice in some detail, but he also knew from Orosius what to think of the vanity of such behaviour, and so he artfully works Chilperic’s aspirations into the framework of his unfavourable contrast between the king’s pride and the unworldliness of Tiberius, whose decision to process to his investiture via the holy shrines rather than the hippodrome is shown to have saved him from assassination⁵³. But for Chilperic, the circus was a symbol of power, not of death; its associations could distinguish his rule from that of his fellow-kings not only in Soissons, his rightful capital, but over Paris too, where, significantly, the legitimacy of his authority was much more contentious⁵⁴.

Chilperic probably derived inspiration not just from the east, but from models closer at hand. The late 570s and early 580s were a period of intricate diplomatic triangulation between the various Frankish courts, the Byzantines, and the Visigoths, and Chilperic’s relations with Leovigild were especially close⁵⁵. One can reasonably assume, therefore, that the Frankish king would have been only too aware of the latter’s Byzantine-inspired elaboration of Visigothic royal ceremonial, which might suggest that urban building projects in the two kingdoms can usefully be seen in parallel. For at much the same time as Chilperic was planning to revive traditional forms of public entertainment for his subjects, Leovigild was taking imperial modes of monumental patronage a great deal further by conceiving not new circuses, but completely

transparent in the parallel phrasing of the conclusion of his damning verdict on Chilperic in *Hist.* VI.46 with that of his final praise of Tiberius in *Hist.* VI.30.

⁵¹ Greg. Tur. *Hist.* V.17: «apud Sessionas atque Parisius circus aedificare praecepit, eosque populis spectaculum praebens».

⁵² A. Dierkens and P. Périn, *Les sedes regiae merovingiennes entre Seine et Rhin*, in *Sedes regiae* cit., p. 287. Letters: Greg. Tur. *Hist.* V.44, imitating the Emperor Claudius in Suetonius, *Claud.* 41.3.

⁵³ Greg. Tur. *Hist.* V.30; Orosius, *Hist.* IV.21.

⁵⁴ Greg. Tur. *Hist.* IV.22, VI.27.

⁵⁵ Greg. Tur. *Hist.* VI.18, 33-34, 40, 45. W. Goffart, *Byzantine policy in the west under Tiberius II and Maurice: the pretenders Hermenegild and Gundovald (579-585)*, in «Traditio», 13 (1957), pp. 73-118.

new cities⁵⁶. Nothing is known for certain of one of his foundations (or, indeed, if it was entirely new) apart from its general location in a recently subjugated area of Vasconia and its suitably triumphant name – *Victoriacum* – but the other, Recópolis, offers a fascinating insight into both the material and conceptual connotations of contemporary urbanism. Symbolically, its creation was linked by John of Biclar not with any individual campaign of conquest, but with Leovigild's general success in establishing peace, having vanquished tyrants and invaders alike. Like Constantine in the aftermath of his victory over Licinius in 324, Leovigild celebrated his unifying achievements by founding a city, but chose to name his *polis* after his son, and not himself, in a clear statement of dynastic intent no less in keeping with imperial precedent⁵⁷. Materially, continuing research at the site of Recópolis has clarified the possibilities as well as the limits of a royally-sponsored urban *grand projet* in the post-Roman west. Its substantial wall-circuit enclosed some 33 ha, the planned layout of which included a separate intra-mural zone given over to what has been interpreted as a rather peculiar palace complex with a substantial and richly-decorated church attached; entrance to this zone was via a street lined with regularly laid-out workshops and housing, and the settlement was supplied with water by aqueduct, as well as a monumental cistern⁵⁸. In broad terms, the foundation bears close comparison with the defining features of the new cities established in the eastern Mediterranean in the sixth century, which have been neatly characterised as «small, fortified, Christian, and imperial»⁵⁹. Recópolis was not, by any stretch of the imagination, Constantinople, but it was a foundation thoroughly in keeping with contemporary Mediterranean ideals of urbanism at a less exalted level.

Although Leovigild's cities and Chilperic's circuses can perhaps function as a crude index of their respective levels of interest in espousing such ideals, it remains the case that Recópolis never became a new royal capital, and nor, in all probability, was it ever intended to serve as one. Instead, Leovigild was seemingly looking to reserve that distinction for Toledo, one of several centres with recent royal associations, but a less distinguished past than most of the potential alternatives. Apart from its centrality within the Iberian peninsula, which should not be neglected as a factor in determining the calculations of a king who needed to keep a particular eye on the Byzantines, but

⁵⁶ John of Biclar, *Chron.* 175-180, 213.

⁵⁷ The construction of the name is nevertheless unusual – why not *Recaredopolis*? – as R. Collins, *Visigothic Spain, 409-711*, Oxford 2004, pp. 55-56, points out, noting the possibility of its post-facto rationalisation.

⁵⁸ L. Olmo Enciso, *The royal foundation of Recópolis and the urban renewal in Iberia during the second half of the sixth century*, in *Post-Roman Towns* cit., pp. 181-198; *Recópolis y la ciudad en la época visigoda*, ed. L. Olmo Enciso, Alcalá de Henares 2008.

⁵⁹ E. Zanini, *The urban ideal and urban planning in Byzantine new cities of the sixth century A.D.*, in *Theory and practice in late antique archaeology*, eds. L. Lavan and W. Bowden, Leiden 2003, pp. 196-223, at p. 214; cf. J. Arce, *La fundación de nuevas ciudades en el imperio romano tardío: de Diocleciano a Justiniano (S. IV-VI)*, in *Sedes regiae* cit., pp. 31-62.

whose annual campaigning took him in all directions, this very lack of prior significance may, as Carmen Eguiluz Méndez reminds us, have been part of its appeal, since it allowed the royal house to impose itself relatively unhindered by spiritual or aristocratic rivals for local power and patronage of the type who were firmly entrenched in Mérida or Seville⁶⁰. Here again Leovigild may have been inspired in part by the example of Constantinople, whether generally, by his elevation of an existing strategic centre, or, more specifically, as in his audacious attempt to confer superior spiritual distinction on his chosen residence by importing particularly potent saints from outside. Constantius II had brought the relics of apostles to Constantinople; Leovigild sought the tunic of Santa Eulalia from Mérida for his new capital⁶¹. This combative strategy of appropriation supposedly foundered upon the cunning of Bishop Mazona, and was no doubt rendered politically impossible by the paradigmatic extent to which Eulalia's cult had come to structure the rhythms of Mérida's life, as is shown by Pablo Díaz. Toledo's spiritual primacy would nevertheless be established incrementally over the decades to come, with the emergence of the cult of Leocadia, and the accumulation through the seventh century, as in Pavia, of a host of intra- and extra-mural churches and monasteries, by now the main focus of royal monumental patronage.

Our appreciation of the monumental realisation of Toledo's status is greatly hampered by a shortage of archaeological data (some evocative sculptural fragments notwithstanding), but Ramón Teja and Silvia Acerbi establish from the textual evidence a compelling circumstantial case for locating the hitherto unidentified Visigothic palace complex not at the heart of the city, as has generally been assumed, but just outside the walls to the north-west, in the immediate vicinity of the Roman circus and two of the churches that served as venues for the Toledan church councils of the later seventh century. If this hypothesis can be proved by excavation, it would offer a telling indication not only of how the symbolism of the palace/circus combination established in late antiquity and subsequently elaborated at Constantinople endured down into the seventh century west, but also of how this could carry sufficient resonance to transcend the intra- and extra-mural divide already vitiated by the Christianisation of urban space. In any event, it is clear that the Visigothic reproduction of imperial settings for urban ceremonial was still evolving in the course of the seventh century. In Francia, by contrast, the Byzantine urban model had less traction, and Chilperic's more humble efforts in this direction left no lasting legacy. Instead, the Merovingians exhibit an increasing preference for rural palaces as the seventh century progresses⁶².

⁶⁰ Cf. R. Collins, *Mérida and Toledo, 550-585*, in *Visigothic Spain: new approaches*, ed. E. James, Oxford 1980, pp. 189-219; I. Velázquez and G. Ripoll, *Toletum, la construcción de una urbs regia*, in *Sedes regiae* cit., pp. 521-578.

⁶¹ *Vitas Patrum Emeretensium* V.6.11-18; G. Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale: Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451*, Paris 1974, pp. 401-409.

⁶² J. Barbier, *Le système palatial franc: genèse et fonctionnement dans le nord-ouest du reg-*

Around the Mediterranean, however, the city had in general retained its distinct significance as an ideological space, a built environment, and an organising principle of social and economic activity across the period under discussion in these papers. The physical and conceptual expressions of those functions had evolved over the intervening centuries, but along trajectories that had largely been established before the disintegration of the western Roman empire, and were carried over into the barbarian kingdoms, before slowly diverging along more distinctly regional lines, a process that was, of course, complicated by the partial restoration of imperial control. Cities in 800 were in the main significantly poorer, smaller, simpler, and less coherent than in 400, but only in south-eastern Spain had urbanism weakened to the extent of bringing down the ancient urban network, so that when an economic revival did subsequently get under way in the Mediterranean, it would largely be structured around long-established centres, the likes of Venice and Amalfi notwithstanding⁶³. Despite its relatively impoverished character, the papers assembled here generally offer an optimistic or value-neutral reading of early medieval urbanism, in part because many of them are concerned with unusually important or relatively wealthy centres, but also in accordance with current historiographical trends that strive to understand its constituent features on their own terms rather than within undifferentiated master narratives of decline or continuity. With the aid of the varifocal lenses prescribed for us by Enrico Zanini we can instead look to examine these developments in all their complexity, recognising the fall of Rome as a pivotal moment in the history of (urban) civilisation, but by no means an end to it. And if we gaze through them at the familiar but evocative image of the repeatedly raised and refurbished frontage of an actual early medieval street through time – the Via Dante in Verona – we can see in its dilapidated masonry a far less sophisticated model of city-living, but an enduring urban civilisation none the less, building, however inexpertly, upon its past.

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num, in «Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes», 148 (1990), pp. 245-299.

⁶³ S. Gutiérrez Lloret, *De la civitas a la madina: destrucción y formación de la ciudad en el sureste de Al-Andalus. El debate arqueológico*, in *IV Congreso de arqueología medieval española*, vol. 1, Alicante 1993, pp. 13-35.